DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 776 SO 019 078

AUTHOR Reitman, Sanford W.
TITLE Taking a Chance on Parent Choice: A Feasible Approach to Ending America's Educational Messiah Complex.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Studies Association (Chicago, IL, November 4-8, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Attitudes; *Educational Policy; *Educational Practices; *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; Parent Rights; *Parent School Relationship; Parent Teacher Cooperation; *School Choice

ABSTRACT

This essay promotes parental free-choice in educational matters. The argument is grounded in the assumption that the individual is a social entity whose nature derives from his or her bio-social rootedness in integrative cultural community. The only feasible means of eradicating the widespread phenomenon of "educational messianism" and restoring a sense of effective civic pride is by making selection of schooling a matter of parental preference. The "Educational Messiah Complex" is defined as the over-dependency of U.S. citizens to rely on the school to solve all social problems. Members of the cultural community need to confront their collective problems instead of delegating them to teachers. Reducing U.S. over-dependency on school systems will come when parents secure the right to send their children to schools of their own choice. This would stimulate teachers and administrators to open their own schools, and both public and private schools would benefit by the greater cooperation of parents who enrolled their children voluntarily in the school. (SM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED293776

3-29-88 SD

"Taking a Chance on Parent Choice: A Feasible Approach to Ending America's Educational Messiah Complex"

by

Sanford W. Reitman, Professor
of Educational Foundations
California State University at Fresno

A paper presented at the 1987 conference of the
American Educational Studies Association,
November 4-8, Chicago

SO019078

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sanford W. Reitman
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

I. Introduction

Advocates of greater parent choice over the schools their children attend typically present their case in terms of libertarian or quasi-libertarian values, whether religious in derivation or secular. The implicit premise underlying most arguments to date for parent choice of the schools their children attend has been that laissez faire individualism or its equivalent in subcultural autonomy ought to take precedence over the demands of the overarching community in educational as well as purely economic affairs. In America, so it is usually asserted or implied by proponents of parent choice, the individual is supposed to be supreme. Accordingly, the state should cease to utilize its taxation power as an axe to require all but the most affluent to attend public schools designated by the state.[1]

In the present essay, I make a case for parent free choice in matters educational, grounded in the radically different metaphysical assumption that the individual is, inherently, a social animal whose authentic nature derives from his or her bio-social rootedness in integrative cultural community. Although I am not the first to argue on those grounds for increased opportunity for parents to select the schools that their offspring will attend,[2] there is a strong likelihood that my "ulterior motives" for urging greater choice are without much precedent. Those motives are the focus of the present discussion. More specifically, I contend that the only feasible means of eradicating the widespread phenomenon that I have elsewhere termed "educational messianism"[3] and, thereby, of restoring a sense of effective civic pride to the American people writ large--of pragmatically essential and morally responsible social self-reliance--is by making selection

of schooling a matter of absolute or, at least, considerably expanded, parental preference. That preference, in turn, requires that all parents of school-aged children be directly subsidized for private school tuition and other educational expenses by the government in the event they elect to send their offspring to private schools instead of conventional socialized schools--as has long been the case in Holland[4] and a number of other nations around the world.

Even were strategic considerations aimed at the overriding goal of restoring and reinvigorating the spirit of what Benjamin Barber[5] has recently termed "strong democracy" not foremost in my thinking, I would still be inclined to support significant expansion of parent educational choice on non-libertarian grounds. However, absent such considerations, arguments advanced by proponents of parent choice limited to the conventional public school sector, such as Mary Anne Raywid,[6] might be somewhat more persuasive to me. Such is not the case. The broader concern at issue herein--dramatically increasing participatory democracy in America so as to avert possible collapse of the democratic ideal and the probable replacement of that ideal by a fascist tyranny[7]--is sufficiently imperative, to my way of thinking, that strategic considerations must at this juncture take priority over all others, discomforting as the "ends sometimes justify the means" value may be to sensitive minds. In saying this, I recognize an ironic kinship with the most radical of the far left "critical theorists," for most of whom the very notion of private schooling appears to be an anathema.

II. The Problem Summarized

What follows is a necessarily oversimplified statement and explication of the basic problem underlying my argument for increased parent choice.[8]

Since the end of World War II and especially the decade of the 1950s, the majority of Americans have singled out and become increasingly and dangerously dependent on the institution of pre-collegiate public schooling for help in overcoming some of the nation's most severe sociocultural dislocations. These change related dysfunctions have ranged from such rank economic problems as America's declining material productivity and competitiveness in the international marketplace to such fundamental sociological crises as the veritable destruction of the nuclear family, rampant crime in the streets, and the development of a more or less permanent underclass subculture of poverty, to name but a few.

It is my contention that the level of dependency upon the schools for the resolution of basic social problems is becoming so great as to now constitute what can be considered a near universal faith--quasi religious in nature--in their salvationary capabilities; i.e., "only more and more schooling can 'save' the American people from imminent catastrophe," so it is believed by practically all of us, including most professional educators and teachers of teachers. I term this historically unprecedented and unwarranted faith in the salvationary capacity of schooling the "Educational Messiah Complex." The metaphor is intended both in its anthropological sense to connote the ascendency of a new cultural universal as well as in its psychopathological origins and implications.

The roots of the Complex are to be found deep in a cultural history

which has encouraged an image of America as the "New Eden" and the public school as the primary agency by which "knowledge becomes utilitarian social power" for the inhabitants of Eden.[9]

Few have forthrightly disputed such idealistic notions, which, as expressed in a variety of passionately-held educational ideologies, have become an integral part of the "American Creed." But since in recent years popular (as well as elite) faith in the social efficacy of schooling has reached dangerous heights in the face of growing analytically as well as empirically-derived evidence of the institution's relative lack of ability to deliver on its exaggerated promises,[10] heresy seems in order at this time. I think it fair to assert without equivocation that schooling is a "false messiah," lacking the social problem-solving power attributed it by most true-believing Americans.

More importantly, I postulate that the Educational Messiah Complex is based on a near-universal displacement of self-regard and perceived locus of fate control. The American people, taken as a whole, have reached a tragic point in their cultural history. They appear no longer able to stand up and face courageously the unavoidable problems that beset us as members of a civilization undergoing basic sociocultural tranformation from an earlier Industrial Age with its emphasis on material productivity to an Age of Postindustrialism and its attendant stress on human services and advanced information technology. In our collective incapacity, we have learned from each other interpersonally and through such institutions as the new mass electronic media to <u>displace</u> our growing failure of nerve onto the relatively "safe" institution of schooling, onto an institution

which conveniently symbolizes successful transition into the future that we ourselves are afraid to deal with forthrightly and in our own generation. Thus, we rationalize simplistically that more and more schooling for our children will, somehow (by purportedly converting knowledge into utilitarian social power), cause the latter to grow up to be adults armed with problem-solving skills and the will to implement those skills. They will, "obviously," do what their parents' generation could not or would not do; namely, tackle gamely the herculean exigencies of their own day--which, for the most part will be hand-me-downs from the present day.

Bluntly stated--and I am far from alone in asserting this[11]--we have become a nation of confused and ineffectual "neurotics," bumbling and stumbling along tilting at sociocultural windmills, at times with a false bragadocio that supposedly masks our underlying impotence. And, our children and the overburdened schools they attend bear the brunt of our pathological escapist tendencies. All the while our problems continue to worsen. And yet, we rarely consider the potentially explosive power of the social dynamite we are storing up for the future when our children grow up to realize that they have been led astray by their irresolute and passive parents.

Even if our society does not self-destruct as a result of such displacement of energy, we and our progeny certainly do not have a great deal to look forward to, as matters presently stand and if we continue to run away from our ever-mounting challenges while awaiting the "coming of the annointed one," the fullfilment of the Eden dream via the actualization of the redemptive promise of schooling.

Since no single person or social institution can, in fact, save our society, although tyrannical pretenders wait in the wings to give the lie to its pluralistic character by preaching a single-factorial determinism,[12] we really have no plausible democratic choice left other than to risk taking the bull by the horns in order to save ourselves; if, indeed, it is not too late even for that.

Space does not permit me to describe in elaborate detail just how we should proceed. It is enough for the present that I merely sketch the outlines of what may perhaps be a better way to envision our collective challenge and to suggest a novel and (to some) heretical policy that will enable the American people to begin looking elsewhere than to our elementary and secondary schools for salvation--without losing whatever unique riches the schools do have to offer in the process.

III. A More Balanced Image of the Socioeducational Ecology

As contrasted with the dismal picture painted above of a deteriorating society obsessed with educational messianism, the image of the American future that I would like to portray as a more hopeful alternative is one of renewed social self-reliance in a framework of restored, or reconstructed cultural community encompassing local, regional, and national levels of civic participation and reordered conceptions of institutional efficacy and purpose. I do not think that such a vision is at all utopian, although I acknowledge that achieving it will be anything but easy.

A. Renewed Social Self-Reliance:

In order to begin effectively coping with our enormously complex

problems, the growing sociopsychological atomization of American society must end. The distorting and ultimately nihilistic mythology of rugged, self-reliant, privatistic individualism must be replaced by a new cultural universal which stresses working together for the common good--without abandoning healthy, contributory and self-affirming individualism in the process. This is the essence of democracy, as understood both by some of the Founding Fathers of this nation (e.g., Thomas Jefferson) and its greatest social and educational philosopher, John Dewey. According to strong democratic political theorist Benjamin Barber:

> ....The real choice we face in the coming years is not between Republicans and Democrats, or between the supply-side and the welfare state, or between hawks and doves; it is between an ever more meaningless and weak form of democracy in which we periodically rubber-stamp the bureaucrats and politicians who govern for us and over us and in our stead, and a strong democracy in which we reassume the responsibilities of self-government.[13]

Today, it is essentially "everyman [and woman] for himself" in America. To the extent that any self-reliance yet remains, it is tenuous <u>individual</u> self-reliance, looking out for number one and, perhaps, his or her family exclusively and increasingly narcissistically; in Lasch's view, an exaggerated concern with one's psychic self which emerges under conditions of extreme alienation, as at present.[14]

In any case, the big problems of today's America, productive of such alienating "over-individualism," as distinguished from those of our

frontier times, are sociopolitical, not individual nor even single interest group in character (even in the past, most were collective in nature): institutionalized divorce patterns; widespread substance abuse; paranoia about Cuba, the USSR, and now Nicaragua; institutionalized racism and sexism; increasing poverty and underemployment; overcrowded prisons everywhere; shoddy automobile and other American-made industrial products; ubiquitous preoccupation with money, sex, and violence; destruction of the natural environment; "AIDS;" and so on. These are not problems amenable to quick treatment by ruggedly self-reliant individuals or even temporarily cohesive members of inspired minority groups, much less passive dependency upon miracles from bureaucratized agencies assigned to perform magical tricks, such as schools. They require unified behavioral commitment by all of us, regardless of our otherwise particularistic interests, loyalties, and lifestyles, and of our school-certified accomplishments. These are transcending social problems amenable only to treatment by the cultural collective viewed universalistically. Therefore, the people of this society must be sufficiently self-reliant as an integrated whole to bring interpersonal wisdom and power derived from democratic dialectic to bear to resolve them; and, thereby, make life better in the now nearly extinct American tradition of <u>shared civic</u> responsibility.

It is imperative that the American people regain a sense of <u>social</u> self-reliance in the modern era--that they throw out obsolete and historically illusory concepts of privatistic individualism which are increasingly choking us into voiceless immobility. We need to regain appreciation for the importance of working <u>together</u> as a team to begin grappling effectively

with all our major problems, not simply the threat of warfare with the Soviets or one of their colonies. The old and tired mythology of the ruggedly self-reliant, if jaded, cowboy or detective hero now best exemplified in Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson movies must be replaced with a perspective that recognizes that each of us individuals is, nonetheless, in the same leaking lifeboat together. We must all actively cocperate or surely we shall all drown! In sociologist Robert Bellah's words: "The time may be approaching when we will either reform our republic or fall into the hands of despotism, as many republics have done before us.[15]

B. Restored Cultural Community and a Balanced Ecology:

Social self-reliance and the rebuilding of cultural community necessarily go hand-in-hand; there cannot be one without the other. In order for the American people to throw off their long-engrained penchant for going it alone--which has led us down the primrose path to inevitable overdependency on the spurious messiah of schooling, we must simultaneously reconstruct our eroding base of cultural community at all levels of societal interaction from the local community grassroot through the state or regional subcultural network to the national, and, indeed, international civic culture which binds the entire social structure together.

"Human beings are community animals," asserted the distinguished social and educational philosopher Kenneth Benne in his 1981 DeGarmo Lecture for the Society of Professors of Education.[16] Professor Benne is correct. The sense of true belongingness to a community gives the only real purpose there is in living in this world--the lack of which is why there is so little genuine exhuberance and joyfulness evident among Americans today.

This sense of belongingness to a real community of fellow mortals lends vibrant purpose to life, because community is, always was, and always will be the natural miliue of human beings, to which all of its individual members extract fellow feeling and return it unstingily by their unselfconscious desire to contribute their various talents for the purely primordial joy of being with and for each other. One need not artificially force oneself to a life of "altruism" in the genuine cultural community, as do some of us in our unnatural state of anomie in order to manufacture a reason for existence in the vacuum. One simply is simultaneously unselfconsciously gracious both as giver and taker in the security of one's natural community home. The ego-alter relationship in a genuine community setting lends dignity to both the individual and the group. In such settings, reciprocity is authentic, not forced, as it all too often is at present in our disconnected society.[17] To realize this is to have a chance, however slim, at regaining control over our lives by reuniting ourselves with our fellows in common struggle to achieve the ends of the lost American dream of gradual progress toward self-perfection, regardless of whether those ends are ever fully attained or not.

Such hopes are not utopian; on the contrary, they are eminently practical. Truly utopian are the so-called practical man's and woman's willingness to "romanticize" those other men and women in our disconnected society who have elected to work with children in centers of learning. It is utopian to depersonalize and dehumanize the formal educational endeavor by imputing god-like powers to human effort as if it were an idealized abstraction happening "out there." Such utopian notions are the result

of the inevitable ideational distortions produced by a seriously imbalanced social ecology. We must gear up to restore balance and integrity to that ecology in our society.

More specifically in relation to education, I propose that we envision the place of schooling in the overall social ecology in a radically different way than we have been doing for the past thirty years while under the illusion that an educational messiah can save us as a people. I suggest that we reorder the balance of the social ecology of the cultural community postulated so that, once again, there is "organic" harmony between the properly understood influence and efficacy of the institutional schooling process and the influence and efficacy of all the other components of a reconstituted social order. In a more ecologically-balanced society, where socially self-reliant members of the cultural community confronted their collective problems courageously and with directness instead of delegating them to schoolteachers, formal education--like earning a living and having sexual relations--would come to be seen as one among many institutional sectors, each of which plays its individually unique, important, but distinctively limited role in humanizing life for those who belong. Such a pluralistic, as opposed to deterministic, conception of the role of schooling does not detract from the significance of that role; but it more realistically comprehends its possibilities and its limitations. Hence, it permits schools to become singularly excellent in what they are capable of doing best, seeking and transmitting knowledge and knowledge-acquiring skills to students, in the broadest sense of facilitating development of increasingly complex thinking abilities; not trying to convert them to a currently fashionable,

narrowly ideological point of view. I agree with Joshua Meyrowitz when he speaks of the necessity for the school to maintain a "knowledge edge" by teaching its students more than they can learn elsewhere. He is probably correct when he suggests that "reading remains the school's trump card."[18] But, he is even more nearly correct when he points to its role in fostering skills and experiences nowhere else to be inculcated "including systematic acquisition of knowledge, interpretation, criticism, and the 'methodologies' of learning and thinking. Another key example of such a skill is the ability to interact with other people--to speak, listen, argue, and discuss."[19] (Emphasis added)

For a socially self-reliant people, what greater contribution can the school make than to instill those four requirements of genuine interpersonal interaction?

As centers of "excellence" in their unique function, then, schools, both tax-supported as well as privately funded, will most assuredly serve a general public citizenry again appreciative of their important but acknowledgedly limited contribution to the local, regional, and national community. Teachers in such schools are no longer perceived of as the right arm of the annointed one, so they feel comfortable in letting themselves go as the artists of the classroom they were always meant to be.[20] Finally freed from the untenable myth that the schools in which they work are public utilities like the telephone company, with miraculous "practical outputs" guaranteed in the short term through the "advanced technology of teaching," schoolteachers are liberated from the absurd ideological pressures from a multiplicity of special interest groups which now enslave them. They are emancipated

from the "accountability game" so beloved of the technocratic mentality to ply their unique art of, in Ignacio Götz' words, "unconcealing the truth"[21] to those of their students who wish to have the truth unconcealed and are able to appreciate the art of teaching involved. In this ecologically-balanced view of schooling, teachers are freed to create their own special learning environments, consonant with their internalized personal vision of their integral relationship to their gemeinshaft and gesellshaft communities. The duality of "I" (the teacher) against "them" (the public, including students) is gone and replaced with the dialogical spirit of "I with Thou."[22]

What needs to be recognized, then, is that schools in the ecologically balanced, self-reliant community are one of many important components of society writ large, and that they have a highly distinctive yet limited role to play in community-societal development; however, a mostly indirect role as touchstones of long term cultural renewal rather than direct role as agents of short term cultural redemption. The functions of American schools should be altered, but they nonetheless remain integral forces for progressive social change.

So, the time has come to reevalute the unique role of both schools and other institutions of learning and human liberation within an interlinked "organic" community context that is holistically educative.

IV. Taking a Chance on Parent Choice

I suspect that the best hope (and it is no more than that) for reducing American over-dependency upon the schooling system for resolving the nation's major social problems will come not from politicians, educational leaders,

and teachers generally; rather from the American lay public itself. And, such a movement to conquor the Educational Messiah Complex and restore cultural community must originate at the grassroot, with parents of schoolchildren. Parents must finally secure the right to send their children to the schools of their own choice, rather than continue to be forced, unless wealthy, to have them attend the nearest tax-supported "public" school. Parents must be granted vouchers or tuition-tax credits, or whatever it takes financially, to send their children to schools that are required to compete in a "free educational market." Parents must be permitted to translate their messianic faith into concrete action that allows them to risk making mistakes in the choice of their children's formal education according to their ideological biases right, left, or in-between. They may, thereby, destroy the hegemony of the monolithic "public" schooling system which, because of its very basic--but equally false[23]--premise of integrative commonality, helps considerably to perpetuate the overriding mythology that schools have non-educational benefits of great significance to confer on society at large. Once the public school monopoly is broken up, the American people will be forced to look elsewhere for solutions to their manifold problems even if all they find is an equally untenable messianic replacement such as "psychotherapy." At least the schools, with which I am singularly concerned, will have ceased contributing to a hurtful cultural illusion; and, perhaps the people will even be stimulated to think about becoming socially self-reliant again, as they once were!

If all American parents were permitted to send their children to the schools of their choice, many adventuresome teachers and other educational

professionals currently forced to indenture themselves to the state would open their own schools in a desire to become freer to teach what they want to in their own way. Parents would, in effect, choose schools and teachers as they now choose hospitals and physicians. They would have the financial resources to do so because the government would provide them with vouchers or some other form of full tuition and expense subsidy instead of requiring them to pay double taxes to have their children attend the schools of their choice. I submit that, given such a newly-available opportunity, many American parents, in particular working single-parents and the disadvantaged, currently estranged from public institutions and each other to a greater extent than others in American society, would elect to take advantage of it by sending their children to "private" schools in the belief that the latter would serve them and their children better ideologically and educationally than state monopoly schools (54% of "nonwhites" compared with 49% of whites, according to a 1986 Gallup Poll[24]). In turn, the conventional public schools, fearing the loss of sizable numbers of their disenchanted clientelle, would either take substantial steps to become more appealing to parents or eventually "go out of business;" although I doubt that enough people would defect to the private sector to cause that to happen. The very knowledge that such an option was available would appease the demanding public and keep the remaining state schools "in line."[25] In any case, both public and private schools would benefit by the inevitably greater cooperation of those parents who enrolled their children voluntarily in them. This would be in great contrast to the situation today where most parents are alienated from the schools and teachers of

their children because they know that they have little or no voice in selecting the mentors of their offspring.

Ironically, under such a plan as proposed, private and public schools alike would fail to satisfy parents' ideological demands for non-educational outcomes, but parents and their children would receive greater educational benefits than have heretofore been available for most; at the minimum, they would believe they have as a psychological result of having made a personal commitment to the schooling service of their choice. As Donald Erickson, who is considered by some the leading authority on private schools, concludes, after summarizing the research on parental choice of schooling:

> The history of private schools suggests that when government does not interfere, schools tend to appear and die, grow and decline, in response to variegated, constantly changing preferences of citizens. Citizens who actively choose the schools which their children attend, from among a variety of available options, seem far more satisfied with their schools than are parents who simply do the "normal" thing, with little thought. Moreover, the active choosers appear to be more concerned, informed, and sophisticated.[26] (Emphasis added)

In short, by opening up significant options for schooling to parents (i.e., not merely options within the prevailing public sector, as Raywid and others have urged[27]), the EMC will be unmasked, because no school can perform the impossible. All that any school can achieve is educational

in character. And that is sufficient, both in ecological terms, as well as in terms of the enormity of the challenge ahead merely to upgrade the institution's capability of providing all American children with the best learning experience possible. Schools are educational services in the broadest sense, not public welfare utilities in the narrow sense. To finally realize this will require that the American people be given the chance to have their illusions about the non-educational benefits of schooling dispelled by the only means possible--granting them the right to test their erroneous conceptions about institutional efficacy in schools--whether public or private--that they, not the state, have selected.

Once those freely-chosen schools have demonstrated their incapacity to accomplish the miracles that they were naively presumed to be able to perform, the American public may then at last concede that their faith in formal education's culturally redemptive power was displaced; they will then have no alternative other than to look elsewhere for their miracles.

Or, more hopefully, to cease waiting passively for miracles to occur altogether; and, instead, begin the arduous process of working together democratically as members of restorative cultural communities to resolve their common problems of living in the new age that is opening up. Then, the American people will begin to realize that education for social and cultural salvation does not occur in highly specialized places called schools, but rather from living and working together on problems of mutual concern in less rigidly structured socioeducational organizations called communities--of which schools are one component whose distinguishing function is to help receptive youngsters learn how to **think** clearly and deeply

so that they may fulfill their own destinies as individuals and, strictly as a windfall, possibly make more responsible contributions to the broader community development process envisioned than they would have otherwise.

All elements of American society who thoroughly distrust radical reconstruction of formal education including the ending of the state "public" schooling monopoly will resist my recommendations: i.e., state socialists who will consider it regressively supportive of the "contradictions of corporate capitalism," corporate capitalists who seek a malleable working force to insure the perpetuation of their ever-increasing acquisitive needs, upper echelon professional educators who have powerful career-related vested interests at stake, liberal educational intellectuals who have internalized the myth of the public school's extra-educational benefits and are distrustful of the capabilities of the "masses" while also being more or less paranoid about the educational right's alleged long term agenda to "displace public education,"[28] and politicians eager to appease influential state school monoply interests in order to insure their votes at election time. The only people who will eagerly accept my recommendations, in addition to some of the nation's most dedicated schoolteachers and objective educational scholars, are the vast majority of "little" Americans who want a greater say so about the education of their children, even though their excessive faith in schooling's messianic attributes may be wrongheaded.

Why not "let" these great numbers of ordinary Americans have their way, wrongheaded though they may be? Let them learn from their mistakes, from trial and error. The most they can lose is their naivete about what

schools are for; but, in exchange, they will undoubtedly gain a real education for their children, one that they can take pride in because they, not some "expert," chose it. Even more importantly, they will receive a second chance at recapturing the essence of the American dream, the challenge of working together again as in the past with other courageous and vital citizens of the strongly democratic community in the pursuit of--if not vulgar "happiness"--certainly a meaningful existence as we push forward onto the new frontiers of our emerging Postindustrial civilization.

I fully appreciate (but do not concur with) strong democracy advocate Benjamin Barber's fear when he cautions that "there are great dangers in the libertarian spirit of the voucher scheme, which is inimical to the very idea of a public good and of public judgments politically generated. The voucher system would mobilize individuals, but it would mobilize them via private incentives; it speaks exclusively to their private interests as parents and thus as consumers of parental goods."[29] He concludes that "vouchers would seem then to serve activity but to corrupt community."[30] (Emphasis added) But, interestingly, after discussing the possible dangers to strong democracy of a free-choice schooling system, Barber, certainly no ultra-conservative, ends up **endorsing** such a system **nonetheless**. That is, aware of its potential abuses, he proposes that we take the risk anyway:

> The strong democrat cannot endorse the voucher idea with enthusiasm, but he may nonetheless feel persuaded to agree with a dean of the Harvard School of Education [Theodor Sitzer], who has written: "Given the conditions of the schools

that serve poor youngsters, it takes a depressing amount of paranoia to suggest that we should not even give the voucher plan a reasonable trial."[31]

Yes, there are, indeed, risks in what I am proposing and what Barber can only endorse lukewarmly. Parent choice of schooling subsidized by vouchers or other means has a realistic chance of being approved as general public policy by the year 2000, in part, perhaps, because there are risks that it may be abused by what Barber terms self-interested, non-public-spirited "free riders."[32] In otherwords, it can appeal to a wide-enough spectrum of the American people to be considered a pragmatically workable prospect for reforming public education and, conceivable, American society writ large. In short, it is a practical rather than a utopian idea. Detractors of meaningful parent choice of every conceivable ideological persuasion are, at bottom, afraid of the real risks involved in such a largescale reform policy. However, the entire point of this essay has been to demonstrate why we as a people must begin to "take risks" again--to stop hoping for "guaranteeable" miracles from others and, instead, to start gambling on our own practical resources as a people once more. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Let us take a chance for a change, while building in powerful safeguards against "libertarian" excesses in any parent free-choice initiative for private schools accepting vouchers. Even those most vehemently opposed to greatly expanded parent choice admit that such safeguards can be implemented in what they term "constrained" choice policies, such as that of Coons and Sugarman in California.[33] Their opposition, then, must be based not only upon what may be construed as a rigidly literalistic and largely

discredited conception of democracy which limits citizen participation to standard party politics and the ballot box, but also a fear of change and its attendant risks bordering on the phobic.

V. Conclusion

I do not share their literal-mindedness nor their anxieties. I am prepared to break with the conventional wisdom regarding the sociopolitical economy of schooling, for the reasons explicated herein. A reconceptualization of formal education as institutionalized activity is in order. And, when shall we get started on such a "chancy" venture? When shall we begin pushing aggressively for basic reform of the financing of public education below the collegiate level so that every parent may send their children to the schools of their choice, "public" or "private"? There is no better time than the present, with its special accent on major educational reform of both the ends and means of the schooling enterprise, to begin sowing the seeds of such a plausible and genuinely redemptive, albeit admittedly heretical idea. Let us hope they take root in the ever-optimistic American mind.

REFERENCES

1. The dominant rationale for parent choice is probably best exemplified at present by the Reagan administration's official position; especially as articulated by Education Secretary William Bennett.

2. Perhaps the most recent scholarly "community interest" justifications for increased parent choice are to be found in Daniel C. Levy, ed., Private Education: Studies in Choice and Public Policy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

3. See especially, Sanford W. Reitman, "American Educational Messianism: A View from a Nation Under Siege," ERIC Report ED 250 822 (microfiche), abstracted in Resources in Education 20 (April 1985): 62-63. See also, Reitman, "Daring to Make Teaching an Art," The Educational Forum 50 (Winter 1986): 137-48.

4. See Estelle James, "Public Subsidies for Private and Public Education: The Dutch Case," in Private Education: Choice and Public Policy, pp. 113-37.

5. Benjamin R. Barber, Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

6. Mary Anne Raywid, "Public Choice, Yes; Vouchers, No," Phi Delta Kappan 68 (June 1987): 762-69.

7. See Clarence J. Karier, "Some Reflections on the Coming of an American Fascism," Educational Theory 37 (Summer 1987): 251-63.

8. A greatly extended discussion of the problem has been developed by the author in his forthcoming book The Educational Messiah Complex, as well as in the essays cited in number 3 above.

9. For elaboration of this idea, see, for instance, Richard J. Whalen, "America's Identity Crisis," Social Science and Modern Society 20 (November/December 1982): 61; Henri Desroche, The Sociology of Hope (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 61; Henry J. Perkinson, The Imperfect Panacea: American Faith in Education 1865-1965 (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 3; and, especially, Merle Curti, The Social Ideas of American Educators (Totowa, N.J: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1978), p. 585.
10. For three examples of the former, see Sanford W. Reitman, An Evaluation of the Reconstructionist Conception of the School's Capacity to Make Sociocultural Changes, unpublished doctoral dissertation (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1969); Louis Emmeriz, Can the School Build a New Social Order? (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, 1974); and Christopher J. Hurn, The Limits and Possibilities of Schooling: An Introduction to the Sociology of Education (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978). In regard to the latter, see, of course, Christopher Jencks et al., Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America (New York: Basic Books, 1972). Also see, Len Barton and Stephen Walker, eds., Education and Social Change (London: Croom Helm, 1985).
11. See, for instance, Maurice P. Hunt, Foundations of Education: Social and Cultural Perspectives (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).
12. See Karier, "Some Reflections on an American Fascism."
13. Benjamin R. Barber, "Voting is Not Enough," The Atlantic Monthly 253 (June 1984): 45.

14. See Christopher Lasch, The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times (New York: Norton, 1984).
15. Robert N. Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 294.
16. Kenneth D. Benne, From Pedagogy to Anthropogogy: A Challenge to the Education Professoriate (The 1981 De Garmo Lecture, Society of Professors of Education, February 19, 1981), p. 9.
17. In this regard, see Alan Watts, The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety (New York: Pantheon Books, 1951), p. 132.
18. Joshua Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 257.
19. Ibid.
20. Reitman, "Daring to Make Teaching an Art."
21. Ignacio Götz, "Heideggar and the Art of Teaching," Educational Theory 33 (Winter 1983): 9.
22. See Martin Buber, I and Thou, translated by Ronald G. Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).
23. Having personally worked in more than fifty public schools for extended periods of time, I can assert without equivocation that such institutions function more to divide people (especially, but not exclusively, by socioeconomic position) than to bond them; not only because of their "hidden curricula," but intentionally--despite official pronouncements to the contrary.
24. Alec M. Gallup, "The 18th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes

Toward the Public Schools," Phi Delta Kappan 68 (September 1986): 58.

25. Ibid., 56.

26. Donald A. Ericson, "Choice and Private Schools: Dynamics of Supply and Demand," in Private Education: Choice and Public Policy, p. 105.

27. See, especially, Raywid, "Public Choice, Yes; Vouchers, No."

28. See, for instance, Ann Bastian et al., Choosing Equality: The Case for Democratic Schooling (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), p. 101.

29. Barber, Strong Democracy, p. 296.

30. Ibid., p. 297.

31. Ibid., p. 298.

32. Ibid., p. 296.

33. See, especially, Amy Gutmann, Democratic Education (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 66. See also, John Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, Education By Choice: The Case for Family Control (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).